

Chapter One

Birth Of A Pioneer

Joseph Smith Jr. was born on December 23rd, 1805 at Sharon, Vermont, the third son of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith, both descendents of hearty New England stock and Revolutionary War patriots. His parents were poor farmers, frequently moving to more promising agricultural areas, such as Palmyra, New York in 1816 and later to Manchester, New York in 1819. The Smiths were a deeply religious family, attending services of many faiths, yet not completely satisfied with any. In 1820, at the age of fifteen, young Joseph Smith was one of those confused by the many different sects of the day, all claiming to be the true faith, yet all proclaiming that all of the others were wrong.

Into that confusion of conflicting claims by Baptists, Shakers, Methodists, Millerites, Campbellites and a whole host of other sects, young Joseph Smith asked, "In this war of words and tumult of opinion, who of all these parties is right, or are they all wrong? If any one of them is right, which is it, and how shall I know it?"⁽¹⁾ While trying to determine which faith was the correct one, the biblical words of James, First Chapter, Fifth Verse came to him. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, ask and it shall be given unto him."⁽²⁾

Joseph Smith decided that rather than remain in darkness, he would ask of God, and he retired to a wooded area near the village of Manchester, where in a quiet grove he kneeled to pray. No sooner had he begun to pray than a thick darkness surrounded him. He felt as though he was about to be destroyed when a pillar of light "above the brightness of the sun" appeared above his head, and standing in the light were "two personages whose brightness and glory defy all description." One spoke, calling him by name, and said, "This is my beloved Son, hear him!"⁽³⁾

When young Joseph was able to speak, he asked which of the many churchs he should join. The heavenly visitor told him that "all were corrupt and an abomination in his sight, teaching the commandments of man, not God", and that he should join none of them.⁽⁴⁾ When the youthful Smith told others of his vision and that all of the many faiths then practiced were wrong, he was immediately subjected to every kind of abuse, ridicule and scorn, the preachers of every faith reviling, persecuting and speaking all manner of evil about him, saying he was a disciple of the devil.

For the next three years Joseph Smith labored in the fields with his father and older brothers, Alvin and Hyrum, suffering continued persecutions. Then, on September 21st, 1823, while praying in the quiet of his bedroom he was visited by an angel wearing a robe of "the most exquisite whiteness", who told him his name was Moroni, "A messinger from the presence of God, who had a work for me to do, and that because of it my name should be spoken of for good and for evil among all nations and people."⁽⁵⁾ The angel told Smith of a book written on pages of gold, giving an account of the ancient

peoples of the American continent, containing the fullness of the ever-lasting gospel as it was delivered to those ancients by the Savior himself. Joseph Smith had been chosen of God to translate those ancient records, but he was told the time to do so had not yet come.

Several times during the next four years Smith was shown where the ancient plates of gold were concealed at the Hill Cumorah, close by the village of Manchester, but he was told by the Angel Moroni that he would not be allowed to possess the precious record until he learned to keep the commandments of God. He was finally allowed to take the plates in September, 1827, at which time the translation of their obscure characters began, eventually to be published as The Book Of Mormon. Three years later, on April 6th, 1830, Joseph Smith organized the Church Of Jesus Christ Of Latter Day Saints, its members known worldwide today as the Mormons.

At nearly the same time that Joseph Smith received his first vision, but before he was shown the plates of gold at the Hill Cumorah, Joseph Stacy Murdock, a man whose life would be closely intertwined with the Prophet, was born only 90 miles east of the Smith home at Manchester. In time they became fast friends and remained so until the Prophet's death, and for another half century after Joseph Smith's murder, Joseph Murdock would devote his life to following his teachings and doing the work of the Prophet.

Joseph Stacy Murdock was born on June 26th, 1822 at Hamilton, Madison County, New York. He was of Scottish descent, and like Joseph Smith, his forefathers were also patriots during the Revolutionary War. Both of his grand-fathers fought with General George

Washington. His maternal grand-father, Nymphus Stacy, was a Captain in Washington's command, while his uncle, Nathaniel Deaskell, "was a guard to Old Washington."⁽⁶⁾ His great-uncle, Col. William Stacy, was presented with a gold snuff box by General Washington for distinguished service and bravery.⁽⁷⁾

Joseph Stacy Murdock was a son of Joseph Murdock, born November 14th, 1783 at Old Lebanon, Connecticut, and Sally Stacy, born April 22nd, 1778 at New Salem, Massachusetts. Joseph's grand-father and great-grand-father, William and Samuel Murdock, were numbered among the most prominent land owners of early New England. His great-great-grand-father, Robert Murdock, born in 1665 at Sterlingshire, Scotland, was one of the first settlers of New England.

Similar to Joseph Smith, Joseph Murdock's parents were also farmers, although perhaps of somewhat greater financial means, since they owned a large tract of sugar maple trees as well as orchards and farmlands where hops were a major part of their crops. Emmeline Wells, a close family friend and wife of pioneer Daniel Wells later recalled the Murdocks as being "fine substantial people in their community, growing large crops of hops on their land. During picking season people came from all over the country to work for them. They were generous, and no one ever left their door hungry."⁽⁸⁾ Young Joseph Murdock would later be remembered for those same virtues.

Joseph was the oldest child of his father's second wife. A first wife, Sally Bonny, had died several years before his birth. An older half-sister, Betsy, born in 1807, was the sole surviving child of that first marriage, her sister Sarah having died in infancy.

Joseph and his half-sister Betsy would be as close as natural brothers and sisters throughout their lives. Joseph also had two younger brothers, John Deans Murdock, born July 28th, 1824 and Nymphus Coridon Murdock, born May 12th, 1833. All three, Betsy, John and Nymphus later followed Joseph in his life long labors for the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Joseph Murdock's boyhood was a happy, although a hard one, for both of his parents were sickly and unable to properly care for him. Perhaps because of that, young Joseph was often described as a frail child. At the age of only 17 months, when his mother was expecting the birth of his younger brother John, he was taken by his mother's parents to be reared on their farm at New Salem, Massachusetts.

His father's sickness and later miraculous cure shaped the youthful Joseph's later life. In 1805 while cutting firewood at age 22, his father attempted to lift a heavy green log and broke a blood vessel in his back, which left him crippled and often bed-fast for the remainder of his life. Although at times he could oversee the operation of his farm, he was unable to work hard and was never free of pain. Joseph's mother was sickly also and was unable to give him proper care, thus the reason he was raised by his grand-parents.

Joseph's journal tells of his early life at his grand-parents home at New Salem, learning to milk cows and take care of livestock. Sometimes he had to learn the hard way, as he later recorded. "My grand-father used to take me down to the barn when he went to milk his cows. He would take me into the cow shed where he would clean the cow's tit and start the milk for me. I would suck the tit and

fill my belly. One morning I bit the cow's tit and she kicked me out the door, so that was the way I learned to milk!"⁽⁹⁾

Even as a young boy he became expert with livestock and had a keen understanding of cattle and horses. In later life that knowledge of livestock would make him a confidant of Brigham Young and a man of great service to his church. Like all boys he enjoyed the joys of youth, as described in his journal. "I grew up helping on the farm, gathering nuts in the fall and going with friends on sleigh riding parties, where we roasted chesnuts and ate apples."⁽¹⁰⁾

But Joseph also suffered the mishaps of youth, as he described in another journal entry. "At 5 years old I was mashed by knocking the lynch pin out of the big wheel of a lumber wagon, which was standing on a hillside. The heavily loaded wagon collapsed and the wheel fell across my body. My head passed between the spokes near the hub, and I was taken up for dead, and was laid out for burial. After a little while I came to and got well."⁽¹¹⁾ We can only imagine the shock his elderly grand-parents must have felt at finding his lifeless body under the heavy wagon wheel, and their joy at his return from the dead. Joseph does not describe his recovery as a miracle, but it must have seemed like a miracle to his aged grand-parents, and in view of the many close encounters he had with death throughout his long life, one can't help but wonder whether he had been spared for a greater purpose in later life.

Life at his grand-parent's home was a happy time for Joseph, and as a boy he considered them his real family, being almost afraid to visit his parents where it seemed only sickness and suffering prevailed. In his journal he tells of a boyhood visit to his home.

"At five years old my grand-parents took me to see my father and mother at New York State, a distance of about one hundred miles. I got in a hurry to leave for fear my father would keep me there, so I got the horse and led it up to a block which I could climb up on. I got upon the block and worked the breast harness over the horse's head and got it in place, and then hitched the horse to the wagon. I ran and got grand-father, and pulled him with me to get him to go along. He could not believe I had harnessed the horse all by myself, but I did, all the same."⁽¹²⁾ After their visit they returned to the Stacy farm at New Salem, where no doubt young Joseph felt more at home.

Joseph remained with his grand-parents until he was ten years old. At that time his father became so crippled that he decided it was his duty to return home so that he could help run the farm. Although little more than a boy, he took over the operation of the farm, overseeing workers hired to harvest crops and taking care of all the livestock, as well as being a big brother to John, age 8. His half-sister Betsy had married Alphonso Green and no longer lived at home.

Joseph's mother, Sally Stacy, was not only sickly and often confined to her bed, but she was also a hard task-master, a stern, outspoken New Englander. Those who knew her described her as being sharp tongued and determined, always wanting things pretty much her own way. From her Joseph learned to be a careful Yankee, industrious and one who could not stand to see anything going to waste. He learned to make the best of everything, but still used good judgment in all things, often helping neighbors who were less fortunate; all traits which would later prove of great value as a leader and colonizer.

While living with his grand-parents at New Salem, Joseph had been raised in religious surroundings, attending church services regularly. After he returned to his parent's farm at Hamilton he attended services of several different denominations, but he was not satisfied with any and claimed no particular religious affiliation. Joseph's father said that none of the churches taught according to the teachings of the Bible, and Joseph described his father's view in his journal.

"My father was bed-ridden and crippled for 30 years. During his long years of suffering he studied the Bible thoroughly, and being well read and versed in its teachings, he could not believe in any of the sects of the day. He stayed aloof from them all, believing completely in the restoration of the gospel, and that the same blessings would be restored as in the days of the Savior. The same blessings of healing and laying on of hands by those having authority of the priesthood, and he had faith that he would live to see the day when the Lord's power would be manifested on earth." (13)

During the early 1800's the area where Joseph lived was a place of great religious upheaval. Preachers from dozens of newly organized sects stumped the land, delivering hells-fire and brimstone sermons to all who would listen. Wild-eyed orators preaching that the end was at hand, and Bible pounding evangelists warning their listeners that they were going to hell with the multitude thundered their messages of doomsday from every pulpit. It was into that wild confusion of religious ferment that in the year 1836 a missionary of Joseph Smith's newly established Church Of Jesus Christ Of Latter Day Saints made his way to the Murdock home.

Joseph's father was no doubt aware of the new "Mormon" religion and of the missionaries being sent throughout the countryside. Being a student of the Bible and seeking the true faith, he had probably heard of the new church and may have read some of its literature. And since the center of the new church was close by, he may even have asked that a missionary visit him, for he couldn't help but see the similarity of their teachings and those of the prophets of old that he had studied in the Bible.

In his journal Joseph wrote, "My father had been given up to die, being in the last stages of consumption. He was so ill that he had to be lifted on sheets to be moved. An Elder of The Church Of Jesus Christ Of Latter Day Saints by the name of Johathan Dunham called at our home and appeared to be anxious to see my father. He went to father's side, and father asked him if he really believed in the new religion. Elder Dunham replied that he did, with all his heart and soul, that it was the true religion restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the same gospel that was held and practiced by Jesus Christ, and that the fullness of the gospel would be restored in our time.

"My father said to Elder Dunham, either you have the true gospel as taught by Jesus Christ or you are the greatest imposter in the work of the Lord. Then he said, now if you have the truth and are of the Lord, I want you to pray for me, and lay your hands upon me, and if you are of the Lord I will be healed, and if you are an imposter I will not be healed. Elder Dunham knelt down and prayed for father, and got up and laid his hands on his head, and blessed him and asked the Lord to heal him of his long sickness and suffering." (14)

Joseph wrote that his father fell into a deep, sound sleep, his face peaceful and serene, and for the first time in years untroubled by pain. In the morning he awoke rested and refreshed and called for his clothes. His wife Sally at first refused to give them to him, but he told her, "I am a well man, give me my clothes", so she did as he asked and he dressed himself and for the first time in years walked to the table where he ate breakfast with his family. His strength was such that he was able to go into the fields and work alongside his sons. "He received this blessing before baptism, so we could see the hand of the Lord in the work of Elder Dunham." (15)

The healing of Joseph's father at the hand of Elder Dunham was the first miraculous cure in that part of New York and the start of the work of the Lord among the people there. Joseph's mother had been ill for many years also, and was often confined to her bed. Joseph does not describe exactly what her ailment was, but does say that after Elder Dunham administered to her, she was made well in a day, and suffered no further afflictions for the rest of her days.

Mormon missionaries continued to visit the Murdock home and soon baptized the entire family. It was 1836 and young Joseph was then 14 years of age, while his father was age 53 and his mother age 58. Joseph's half-sister Betsy and her husband, Alphonso Green, were also baptized at the same time, as was his brother John.. Nymphus, then only 3 years old was not baptized at that time. The Murdock's were numbered among the first Saints baptized in New York State and they always felt that it was a great day when Elder Dunham stopped at their door.

During the next several years much of the responsibility of running the family farm rested on young Joseph's shoulders. It was while over-seeing workers in the hop vine fields that he first saw his future wife. One day he noticed a pretty, black eyed girl among the hop pickers. He learned that her name was Eunice Sweet and that her home was at Albany, New York. She was four years older than Joseph, having been born on October 27th, 1818. It was love at first sight, and Joseph decided then and there to make her his wife, but one thing stood in his way, and that was his mother.

We can only guess at the means Sally Murdock used to discourage the courtship, for she expected her son to do better than marry a hired girl, especially one who was older than he, so for several years they had to meet in secret. On June 26th, 1842, on Joseph's twentieth birthday, he and Eunice Sweet were secretly married at Albany, New York. He later told how the unexpected news was broken to his mother several days later.

One morning Joseph did not get up quite as early as his mother thought he should, for she wanted him out in the fields to see that those who had been hired to work were on the job. After calling several times she went upstairs to his room and found Joseph with Eunice. Joseph said that he began laughing, but that Eunice was scared. Sally gave them both a terrible tongue-lashing before Joseph could tell her that they were married, and then he had to show her their marriage certificate before she would believe him. It took a lot of explaining to finally pacify his mother, but his father told him it would have been a harder job if he had told his mother of his intentions before getting married. (16)

It took Sally several days to accept the fact that Joseph was really married, but when she learned that Eunice was a refined and well educated woman, and that she was certified as a school teacher, she welcomed her into her home. Eunice accepted the new gospel enthusiastically and was baptized soon after her marriage to Joseph. During her lifetime she proved to be a wonderful helpmate to Joseph, and although they never had any children of their own, she later helped raise children of Joseph's later wives and educated most of them in her own little one room family school.

Shortly before Joseph's marriage, his father suffered what today would probably be described as a stroke. Joseph wrote only that his father became crippled, deaf and deranged, and was steadily becoming worse. Joseph had studied the teachings of his new religion and its Articles Of Faith. After he received the gospel as revealed by Joseph Smith he loved it with all his heart and soul and would have given his life for it, and often he wished that he could be with the Prophet and the main body of Saints. He longed to follow the Saints to Kirtland and Missouri, but he had the responsibility of caring for his family and their farm.

His father's illness and the fact that he appeared to be growing weaker every day finally forced Joseph to make a decision. He was the head of the family and was responsible for his parents and his two younger brothers. It was a hard decision to make, but he was determined to leave their prosperous farm and comfortable home and travel nearly a thousand miles west into the unknown to be with the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The Murdock farm was an ancestral home, having been in their family for generations. The Murdocks had been in New England for nearly 200 years, and their property was considered to be among the best kept and most valuable in the area. It would be very hard to leave it for he knew not what, but Joseph knew that if his father's life was to be saved he had to get him into the hands of the Prophet as quickly as possible. So the decision was made, they were going to Nauvoo!

Footnotes - Chapter 1

1. History of the LDS Church, Vol 1, Pgs 3 - 10
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Ibid, Pgs 11 - 14
6. Journal of Joseph Stacy Murdock (Hereafter referred to as Journal, JSM)
7. Ibid
8. Reminiscences of Emmaline B. Wells as recorded by Millie Murdock Witt
9. Journal JSM
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. Ibid
16. Ibid
- 17.